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SUBJECT: ZIMBABWEANS CROWD INTO JOHANNESBURG CHURCH

REF: A. PRETORIA 2646

[B](#). HARARE 157

[C](#). TRENKLE-LANGE EMAIL OF 8/1/07

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[1](#). (U) Central Methodist Church in downtown Johannesburg has become a haven for Zimbabweans fleeing the economic and political crisis in Zimbabwe. PolOff visited the church August 1 and met with Bishop Paul Verynn, pastor of the church. Verynn said that more than 1,000 people are staying in the church each night. The crowded and dirty rooms of the large church facility are packed with bags, suitcases, mattresses, and blankets. Verynn says that Zimbabwean migrants are sleeping in the stairwells and every corner of the church, so many that you literally cannot even enter the doorway of church at night.

[2](#). (U) As many as 20-30 new Zimbabweans arrive every day, part of an increasing migration of Zimbabweans fleeing to South Africa (ref A). Verynn believes the church had a moral obligation to take in the migrants, although the visibly exhausted bishop noted that the church is bursting at the seams and will no longer be able to accept new "guests."

[3](#). (U) The church has become a virtual mini-city, with a clinic in a former office (a volunteer doctor visits twice a week) and a private school for students ranging from 6 to 60 years old. There are separate rooms for women and families, although the overwhelming majority of the church residents are young men (estimated ages 16-30) sent by their families to make money to send back home. A grassroots Zimbabwean exile organization, Southern African Women's Institute for Migration Affairs (SAWIMA), has started a soup kitchen at the shelter three days a week, feeding 450 people per day. SAWIMA would like to expand the soup kitchen to feed all those in need five or six days a week, but currently does not have resources.

[4](#). (SBU) PolOff spoke with a sampling of the Zimbabweans living at the church, who recounted tales of economic hardship and desperation. Several had arrived in the last few weeks, following the GOZ's freeze on prices and resulting commodity shortage. A group of young men, who would not give their names, said they were former soldiers who were fed up with the low pay; one claimed there were 38 former soldiers staying at the church. Another former soldier said he had come to South Africa because he feared for his life after he

refused to beat up opposition leaders.

¶5. (SBU) The overwhelming majority of Zimbabweans staying at the church do not have the legal right to live in South Africa. They are considered by the South African Government as illegal economic migrants. The SAG continues to deport hundreds of Zimbabweans each day to Beitbridge, Zimbabwe (ref B), many of whom cross into South Africa illegally again. The lack of legal status for the Zimbabweans makes it difficult for the church to seek SAG assistance for the migrants. Recent press coverage of the church has led to some private donations from South Africans.

¶6. (SBU) COMMENT: The overcrowded Central Methodist Church is the most visible manifestation of an expanding Zimbabwean refugee/migration crisis in South Africa. We suspect that a very large number of Zimbabweans are staying with family members or friends, or are crowding into shared apartments. While the total number of Zimbabweans living in South Africa is impossible to estimate with any accuracy, we believe the number crossing into South Africa is growing and that the rate will only increase as the economic crisis in Zimbabwe deepens. Post looks forward to the planned PRM visit in September (ref C) and will continue to look for appropriate ways for the U.S. to assist.
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